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Introduction: Shakespeare in Modern Japan

In *Newsletter* sent from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Lisa Peter writes:

As Shakespeare is generally considered one of the most English playwrights, it is quite astonishing that his plays travel so well. After all, why should, for example, the story of a Scottish king like Macbeth be of any relevance to people in India or in China?¹

In my view, the story of Macbeth is relevant to people in Japan. Akira Kurosawa's *Kumonosu-jo* [*Throne of Blood*], a world famous film adaptation of *Macbeth*, proves the relevance. Seeking the beauty of Noh in it, he succeeded in fusing Shakespeare and Japanese culture.

Shakespeare, a globe-trotter, arrived in Japan in the middle of the nineteenth century when she promoted her rapid Westernization or modernization. To the Japanese, being "modern" meant having an economic system of industrial capitalism and a political system of liberal constitutionalism built up in the United States and European countries. Calling Shakespeare "Sao" affectionately, the Japanese accepted him as a cultural hero, and read translations of his works and saw his plays adapted for the Japanese stage.

A notable feature of Shakespeare appropriation in the Meiji era (1868-1927) was to adapt his plays for Kabuki theatre, because hardly anyone had seen European drama. This method was highly effective to popularize Shakespeare and disseminate Western culture as well as to give the Japanese an opportunity to know things European. The Japan premiere of Shakespearean drama was *Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka* [*The season of Cherry Blossoms: The World of Money*], an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* which was dramatized by Hikoza Katsu and performed by the Nakamura Sojuro Kabuki Company in 1885. In 1884 Shoyo Tsubouchi translated *Julius Caesar* in Joruri (ballad drama) style, using the Japanese native poetic form of seven-five syllable metre used in *tanka*, *haiku*, and the dramatic form of Kabuki and Noh. This was

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¹ Lisa Peter, "Shakespeare around the world," *Friends Newsletter*, Spring 2015 (Stratford-upon-Avon: The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, 2015), 10.

a free and loose translation, whose title was *Shizaru Kidan: Jiyu no Tachi Nagori no Kireaji* [*Caesar's Strange Tale: Residual Sharpness of the Sword of Freedom*].

Tsubouchi, who brought out the Shakespearean canon in Japanese during the period from 1909 to 1928, was the first to give a serious consideration to what the Japanese should learn from Shakespeare and how contemporary Japanese drama should be improved by his dramaturgy. His motto was to interpret Shakespeare from Japanese standpoint and to try to perform his drama for the Japanese sake. His *Shizaru Kidan* and Udagawa's *Sakuradoki* may be the fountainhead of Kurosawa's film adaptations and Yukio Ninagawa's stage adaptations in the half of the twentieth century.

In the late Meiji era there was an enhanced interest in *shingeki* (new drama) which deliberately cut off traditional dramatic forms in favour of an intellectual and realistic approach. *Shingeki* movement expressed opposition to the established stage, and there was a tendency among directors and actors to separate from Kabuki and classics. The members of the movement thought Noh and Kabuki were out of date, and wanted to Westernize the theatre world. Tsubouchi was the leader of a group of amateurs working for a more "cultivated" theatre. In 1906 he established the Bungei Kyokai (The Association of Literature and Arts) and threw his energy into the training actors and the improvement of drama. His faithful translation of *Hamlet* produced by the Bungei Kyokai in 1911 is considered as the first presentation of *shingeki*. But Tsubouchi disbanded the Bungei Kyokai in 1913. Therefore, Kaoru Osanai and Yoshi Hijikata founded the Tsukiji Shogekijo (little theatre) as the base of *shingeki* in 1924.

In 1939 World War II started, and Shakespeare's drama became chiefly the object of a scholarly study. After the war ended, Hijikata directed Shakespeare's plays for the public. In 1955 Tsuneari Fukuda directed his translation of *Hamlet*. This performance was an epoch-making event on the history of Shakespearean stage in Japan. Noticing the fundamental difference between Shakespeare and Kabuki, he tried to express his idea when he mounted his theatrical production. In the 1970s Yushi Odashima started to translate the complete works of Shakespeare in a colloquial style. The Shakespeare Theatre Troupe, whose director was Norio Deguchi, performed all of Odashima's translations at a small underground playhouse from 1975 to 1981.

It is worthy of attention that adaptation erases cultural and historical boundaries between Shakespeare and us. Recently cross-cultural performances are in vogue. Yukio Ninagawa and Tadashi Suzuki are the important directors who began intercultural explorations of Shakespearean stage. But they develop different styles of staging. Ninagawa's stage sets and theatrical costumes are gorgeous and beautiful, but Suzuki's stage setting is simple and stoic. He radically changes Shakespeare's original and presents the combined drama made

from fragments of various other plays. For instance, In *The Tale of Lear*, which was written about the fantasy of an old man in hospital and performed by male actors in 1984, Lear's fool was changed to his attendant nurse. Thus Suzuki always shortened Shakespeare's original drastically and makes his unique version.

Nowadays Japanese directors are much inclined to fuse Shakespeare with their traditional drama, such as Kabuki, Noh and Kyogen. At the end of the sixteenth century a woman named Izumo no Okuni, who probably died after 1607, started to play Kabuki. Yet, officially, till the late nineteenth century women, believed to corrupt public morals, were replaced in Kabuki by "onnagata", a female impersonator. In 2005 Ninagawa directed *NINAGAWA Twelfth Night* at the Kabuki-za at the request of Kikunosuke Onoe, a young "onnagata". Expressing both female sexuality and male sexuality with gestures and dancing, he played the roles of Viola, Cesario and Sebastian. Ninagawa used a large mirror of reflecting a stage setting, box seats, and even the balcony. Therefore, a sense of oneness developed between actors and audiences. This unique version of Shakespeare charmed both Kabuki fans and lovers of Shakespeare.

Noh has been built on Zen techniques of suggestion and stylized implication. According to Zen philosophy, one must look inside oneself for understanding through meditation. Zeami points out that "no action" is more important than action. The most meaningful moments in a performance are those when an actor has just finished a gesture or a dance or a speech and then, in complete silence and solemn stillness, manages to do more than only attract the audience's attention. Moreover, Noh performances have a relationship with Shinto, an ancient religion including the worship of gods that represent various parts of nature.

Kuniyoshi Munakata tries to exploit the possibility of changing Shakespeare's text into Noh text. For instance, his *Noh King Lear* begins with the scene of a touching reunion between Cordelia and Lear. Changing her from a reflection of divine salvation to that of Buddhist mercy, he develops Shakespearean theme of love and redemption. When Cordelia's ghost invites Lear to the next world, spectators understand Zeami's concept of "yugen", quiet, mysterious and profound beauty. *Noh King Lear* is not Shakespeare's work but a new Noh drama created by Munakata. In 2015 he produced *Noh Romeo and Juliet* at a Noh theatre.

In 2005 Satoshi Miyagi, the leader of the Ku Nauka Theatre Company, directed *Othello* in Mugen [Phantasmal]-Noh style completed by Zeami. In Mugen-Noh, gods, spirits of plants and animals, and ghosts of heroes and heroines appear and talk a story of personal history in a traveller's dream. In this play, Desdemona's ghost appeared in the dream of a priest and told about her life.

Kyogen is a short farce giving light relief to the audience within Noh plays. Noh treats all its themes seriously, but Kyogen preserves the spirit of the holiday crowd and mildly satirizes society. Actors do not wear masks, whereas Noh players do. In 1991 Yasunari Takahashi made a Kyogen adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* titled *Horazamurai [The Braggart Samurai]*, and in 2001 he performed *Machigai no Kyogen [The Kyogen of Errors]*, a Kyogen adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*. His intention was “to re-create the original in a completely different, almost opposite style, and to challenge the tradition of Kyogen,”² and to give a new shape to a Shakespearean play.

I have traced a sketch history of Shakespeare acceptance in Japan so that readers may understand clearly how his drama has been appropriated so far. This collection of essays will give them useful information about magic performed by Japanese theatre practitioners, cartoonists and novelists of today.

In “Some Japanese Shakespeare Productions in 2014-15,” Shoichiro Kawai, a scholar, translator and adapter, gives the latest information on Shakespeare productions mounted in Japan. His article covers his own experience in staging the Bunraku *Falstaff* and his Japanese versions of *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Macbeth*. Bunraku is a Japanese traditional puppet show. He describes in detail why and how he put the Bunraku *Falstaff* on the stage. Moreover, he makes his observation on Shakespeare productions directed by Ninagawa and other theatre practitioners. Kawai discusses avidly artful and effective devices for transforming Shakespeare’s drama into contemporary Japanese theatre.

In “Finding a Style for Presenting Shakespeare on the Japanese Stage,” Ryuta Minami points out that the changing styles of Japanese translations of Shakespeare reflect the shifting ideas of dramatic languages on the present-day stage. Until now theatre practitioners have centered on visual aspects of Shakespeare productions, but today there is a tendency among them to change conventional styles. Minami discusses Norihito Nakayashiki’s exciting challenge to re-style Shakespeare. He attempts to detach characters from their emotion by the use of a series of unconventional styles in his performances called “Nyotai (Female Body) Shakespeare” acted by the Kaki Kuu Kyaku, his female troupe. Avoiding to adopt conventional verbal styles and exploring the new possibility of actresses, he tries to highlight the discrepancy between the spoken lines and the performing body. Minami considers this is an entirely original and unprecedented experiment.

² Yasunari Takahashi, “Kyogenising Shakespeare/Shakespeareanising Kyogen: some notes on *The Braggart Samurai*,” *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, eds. Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 214.

Ted Motohashi takes up the translation theories developed by I. A. Richards, Roman Jakobson, Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin in his article, “‘I saw Othello’s visage in his mind’, or ‘White Mask, Black Handkerchief’: Satoshi Miyagi’s *Mugen-Noh Othello* and Translation Theory.” Motohashi outlines the fundamental feature of dramatic translation and proposes the issue on translatability and untranslatability between linguistic and cultural differences. He argues that translation on stage could revitalize cross-cultural negotiations between innermost traditions of particular speech-acts. Moreover, he states that traditional theatre is a site where past memories are revolved and revived, but ultimately transformed back into the past. In order to illustrate his argument, he uses the case of Satoshi Miyagi’s *Mugen [Phantasmal]-Noh Othello* performed by the Ku Nauka Theatre Company in 2005. He considers this adaptation fills a gap between the traditional form of Noh and the modern style of drama as well as a gap between the past and present and that Miyagi succeeded in liberating the Western theatre of words into the Eastern theatre of silence.

In “‘Thou are translated’: Remapping Hideki Noda and Satoshi Miyagi’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in Post-March 11 Japan,” Mika Eglinton examines the intralingual and intracultural relationship between Hideki Noda’s adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* performed in 1992 at the end of Japan’s “bubble” era and Satoshi Miyagi’s revivals of the same play in 2011 and 2014. In her view, Noda’s work is rooted in linguistic exploration, but Miyagi takes a great interest in dramatic expression capable of transcending the barriers of languages. He directed Noda’s adaptation a month after the March 11 earthquake and the subsequent nuclear catastrophe in the Tohoku district. She discusses what was lost and gained in the process of adaptation in the wake of the environmental catastrophe, and moreover, whether her English translation to Noda’s text full of wordplays was projected in Miyagi’s productions as subtitles for non-Japanese speaking audiences. As a translator, she takes up a perplexing problem of (un)translatability confronted by translators, adapters and directors. Emi Hamana’s paper, “Performing Shakespeare in Contemporary Japan: The Yamanote Jijosha’s *The Tempest*,” explores the significance of performing Shakespeare in contemporary Japan. She discusses how and why the Yamanote Jishosha staged *The Tempest* in Tokyo in 2015 in the Japanese context with social-political issues after the 11 March apocalyptic disaster in the Tohoku district. As a director, Masashi Yoshida radically deconstructed Shakespeare’s text, and tried out an experiment called “hyper-collage” and a new acting style. Following the postcolonial readings of the play, his dramatic company proposed the subject of the relevance between Shakespeare and contemporary Japan. Hamana states that Yoshida succeeded in not only revamping Shakespeare’s play but also globalizing it.

Kuniuoshi Munakata has attempted to change Shakespeare’s text into Noh text and to create a new drama. In “Noh Creation of Shakespeare,” he

writes about his own experience as a theatre practitioner and Noh player. Nearly forty years ago he asked himself, “Can I perform Shakespeare’s drama in the Noh style?” This provided a new starting point for his furthering the possibility of Noh adaptation of Shakespeare. Until now he performed *Noh Hamlet*, *Noh Othello*, *Noh Lear*, *Noh Macbeth*, and so forth. His essay contains the Noh text of *Macbeth*, and interviews and dramatic criticisms given at home and abroad. Readers may understand how and why he adapts Shakespeare’s drama to Noh which embodies Zeami’s concept of “yugen”.

Yukari Yoshihara elaborated on the reproduction of Shakespeare’s works in manga/animation/comic adaptations in “‘Toward Reciprocal Legitimation’ between Shakespeare’s Works and Manga.” In her opinion, Shakespeare’s works and up-to-date re-workings in pop culture are not only involved in complex negotiations with each other but also in a never-ending process of reciprocal enrichment. Moreover, she remarks that manga adaptations are helpful to commercialize Shakespeare’s works. Her paper contains useful information about the politics of gender/sexuality found in Japanese manga/animations/comic adaptations. In addition, she comments on English and American manga adaptations as well as Japanese ones from the 1950s to the 1970.

Shakespeare has exerted a deep influence on the development of Japanese literature since the Meiji era. Especially *Hamlet*, a great tragedy which is full of mysteries and ambiguities has given inspiration to Japanese men of letters and aroused their appetite for writing. They utilized it to awaken their imagination and to show their creative power. Each work is a reflection of *Hamlet* mirrored through Japanese language and culture. In “*Hamlet* and Japanese Men of Letters,” Yoshiko Kawachi examines the novelized *Hamlets* written before, during and after the World War II, and she considers how much impact Shakespeare has had on not only the modernization of Japanese literature but also the mind of the Japanese.

These articles show clearly that there are infinitely various versions of Shakespeare in modern Japan. Readers may know how Shakespeare is appropriated in the Far East. He is not only the possession of the West but also that of the East. I am sincerely delighted to convey Japanese ideas and views on Shakespeare to people throughout the world at the 400th anniversary of his death.

Shakespeare is a timeless poet and playwright. Quoting Ben Jonson’s phrase, Shakespeare is “not of an age, but for all time,” Tsubouchi addressed to Shakespeare, “All right, you will live a longer life as a popular playwright than all of the modern dramatists.”³ It deserves special attention that two literary men of different nationalities predicted Shakespeare’s longevity. It is absolutely certain that he is still alive while exercising all his magical charm on the globe.

³ Shoyo Tsubouchi, “Shakespeare at Random,” *Shoyo Senshu [The Selected Works of Shoyo]*, ed. The Shoyo Kyokai, separate vol. 5 (Tokyo: Daiichi-shobo, 1978), 372-73.